



Llama: A fly with a native American connection

By Jim Abbs

While we have heard about pre-historic peoples fishing with fur or feathers crudely wrapped on a bone-type hook, there are no documented cases of flies with truly native origins, at least in the Americas. One fly that may have some aboriginal connections comes from the Menomonee Indians in central Wisconsin. The Menomonee currently reside (and have for the last 300 plus years) in the northeast region of Wisconsin, where their extensive lands include the headwaters and a substantial segment of the upper Wolf River. They have lived in this same region since their first contacts with Europeans in 1634. This section of the Wolf River is perhaps the most famous and best western-style water in the State of Wisconsin, surrounded by towering stands of native white pines and including water falls, challenging whitewater and even some flies-only trout water.

Obviously for fly fishers in the Midwest, the Wolf is a holy water of sorts and is often a prime destination, even for the famous. Many legendary brown and brook trout have been caught (and recaptured) in these waters. The Menomonee are famous for their reverence for nature -in fact their very name means "Wild Rice Men", a reference to the fact that they refuse to cultivate wild rice, because it is viewed as an insult to mother earth. It is not surprising that the portions of the Wolf River that lie on the Menomonee lands are wild and natural.

The famous fly that originated from the Menomonee waters of the Wolf is the Llama streamer. This fly has shadowy origins, but everyone agrees that it appears to have originated, at least in the last century, from a member of the Menomonee by the name of Miles Tourtilloutt (if you wonder why this native American has a distinctly French name, remember the influence and habits of the French in the Great Lakes region in the 1600s and 1700s). Apparently Mr. Tourtilloutt had a fly shop of sorts on the Menomonee reservation and tied flies, which he sold to visiting fly anglers. This fly was given the highest praise: it was equal to worms in taking trout from the famous Wolf.

In recent times the Llama was popularized by an eastern fly expert, Eric Leiser. In the early 1970's, Leiser received a copy of the fly and tested it locally. A couple of years later, Leiser wrote (for the Flyfisher magazine) that the Llama is an astounding fly that works when other methods fail, taking trout with regularity, in many waters and in many states.

The Llama has some unusual features, the most striking of which is a downwing of woodchuck guard hair, with a white tip, a black bar, a tan mid-section and a black base. It may be this natural variation in color that makes the fly so effective. The Llama also is reported to be effective for Atlantic salmon. Llamas are tied with alternate body materials, but always with the woodchuck wing.

MATERIALS

Hook: 2-3X long streamer hook (Tiemco 5263 or Mustad 38941), sizes 6-12
Thread: Black (6/0)
Tail: Grizzly hackle fibers (length of gap width beyond bend)
Rib: Flat gold tinsel
Body: Red floss
Wing: Woodchuck guardhair fibers with black, tan, black and white colors showing
Hackle: Grizzly hackle wound as a collar
Head: Black (a white eye is optional) lacquer coating.

TYING STEPS

1. Secure the hook in the vise and wrap shank toward the rear of the hook. Tie in Grizzly tail and Flat gold tinsel
2. Wrap the thread forward to about 1/8 inch from the eye of the hook. Tie in red floss and wrap the red floss toward the bend of the hook and back behind the eye so as to create a cigar-shaped oval (Eric Leiser's term) on the hook shank. Tie the floss off and clip excess. (For fishing heavier water, consider winding some fine lead wire on the body).
3. Take the gold tinsel and wrap behind the tail and then forward in an even spiral toward the end of the floss. Tie off tinsel and clip excess.
4. Select a bunch of hair from the back of the woodchuck with the black-tan-black-white color bars for the wing. The wing should extend from about 1/5 the distance of the hook shank behind the eye to slightly beyond the length of the grizzly tail. Leave in some underfur, but not too much. The proper length of wing woodchuck hair will vary with hook size.
5. Tie in the wing, including a few turns of thread in front and in the rear under the wing. Clip excess butt hairs and wind the thread to an even taper.
6. Wind on the grizzly hackle collar as you would for a wet fly and fold it toward the rear of the fly over the butt end of the wing hairs. Tie down tip and trim excess.
7. Build the head with the black thread, giving a smooth taper. Coat with black lacquer for the best finish.
8. After the black lacquer is dry, take a tooth pick and create a white eye with a drop of white paint. For the black pupil, use a toothpick with a smaller drop of black lacquer.